Mesoamerican Voices presents a collection of indigenous-language writings from the colonial period, translated into English. The texts were written from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries by Nahuas from central Mexico, Mixtecs from Oaxaca, Mayas from Yucatan, and other groups from Mexico and Guatemala.

The volume gives college teachers and students access to important new sources for the history of Latin America and Native Americans. It is the first collection to present the translated writings of so many native groups and to address such a wide variety of topics, including conquest, government, land, household, society, gender, religion, writing, law, crime, and morbidity.

Matthew Restall is Professor of Latin American History at Pennsylvania State University. He is the author of more than thirty articles and essays and seven books, including The Maya World (1997) and Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest (2003).

Lisa Sousa is Assistant Professor of Latin American History at Occidental College in Los Angeles. She has coedited and translated The Story of Guadalupe (1998), with James Lockhart and Stafford Poole, and is completing a book manuscript on indigenous culture and gender in colonial Mexico.

Kevin Terraciano is Associate Professor of Latin American History at the University of California, Los Angeles. He studies the Nahuatl, Mixtec, and Zapotec languages of central and southern Mexico and is the author of many published writings on colonial Mexico, including The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca (2001).
MESOAMERICAN VOICES

Native-Language Writings from Colonial Mexico, Oaxaca, Yucatan, and Guatemala

Edited by

MATTHEW RESTALL
Pennsylvania State University

LISA SOUSA
Occidental College

KEVIN TERRACIANO
University of California, Los Angeles
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This volume evolved over more than a dozen years from the collections of documents that we assembled for undergraduate students in courses on colonial Mexican and Latin American history. Such collections began with documents translated from Nahuatl by James Lockhart, which we three were required to read as graduate students at UCLA. In fact, all three of us took his upper-division class on the Indians of colonial Mexico in the spring of 1988. The collections grew as we added materials that we had found and translated for use in our doctoral dissertations and other projects, and as we began to teach our own courses. We continued to swap materials, exchange ideas, and discuss approaches to using such documents in the classroom. Eventually, we three editors and authors combined our efforts and contributed equally to this volume.

We are thus very grateful to James Lockhart for the various roles he has played in the evolution of this project. First, he introduced us to the labor and pleasure of translating and analyzing native-language texts for the purposes of writing history. Second, he generously allowed us to use his course reader for our classes and now is allowing us to use his original transcriptions and translations of several Nahuatl-language documents, which we have left unaltered or have modified only slightly because we do not pretend to be able to produce better translations. Finally, we thank Jim for his careful reading of the manuscript, his comments on every chapter, and his advice on how to proceed at many stages of the process. This volume clearly would not exist without him.

Also, we would like to acknowledge several other scholars who preceded us in working with these types of native-language texts, some of which were published in transcription and translation, making it possible for us to access and translate them here—especially Arthur J. O. Anderson, Frances Berdan, Pedro Carrasco, S. L. Cline, Charles Dibble, Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, Frances Karttunen, Miguel León-Portilla, Jesús Monjarás-Ruiz, Stafford Poole, Luis Reyes García, Ralph Roys, Susan Schroeder, and Gunter Zimmermann.
We also would like to thank the directors and staff of the various archives where the original Mesoamerican sources were located, most notably the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City and the state and local archives of Oaxaca and Yucatan. We also thank the undergraduate and graduate students who have read and discussed many of the sixty sources presented in this volume. Finally, we are grateful to Frank Smith and his colleagues at Cambridge University Press for their many contributions to the finished product.

Let us comment briefly on our method. We have tried to provide idiomatic modern English translations that correspond closely to the meaning of the texts while retaining some of the conventions and style of the original language. As a result, a range of colonial Mesoamerican literary styles has been partially preserved, some dry and legalistic, others vividly conversational, stilted and awkward, or poetic and steeped in metaphor. We seek to retain some of the repetitive, rhetorical aspects of the writings and to convey a sense of their eloquence. For example, in the Nahuatl formal texts, especially those from the Florentine Codex, we provide the intended meaning of many (but not all) metaphorical expressions rather than translating the metaphors literally.

We italicize and define the first usage of significant native-and-Spanish-language concepts, and then define them in parentheses and in the glossary. For example, rather than translating the Nahuatl word *altepetl* as “city” or “town,” we prefer to retain the original word in the translation and thereby challenge the reader to learn an important indigenous concept. The glossary at the back of this volume contains brief definitions for most of the Spanish, Nahuatl, Maya, and Mixtec terms retained in the documents. Nearly all the native-language texts in this collection contain Spanish loanwords, some more than others. We have translated the loanwords into English, retaining them (and defining them in parentheses) when they seem to represent a significant introduction to the material culture or conceptual vocabulary of the period. In general, loanwords refer to introduced items or concepts that have no ready indigenous equivalent; the number of loanwords in a text reflects the writer’s familiarity with Spanish. Texts that include an inordinate number of loanwords are identified in the document’s introduction.

The punctuation and organization of the texts into sentences and paragraphs conform to conventional standards and often do not exist in the original documents. We reserve brackets for implicit or understood, but unstated or unreadable, material in the original texts; information in parentheses should be explanatory. In general, we have tried to avoid both brackets and parentheses as much as possible, to make the texts more readable and less confusing. Also, we try to resolve the ambiguities in a translation by simply choosing one possible meaning rather than presenting various possibilities.

Finally, in the introductions to each chapter and to each document, we have attempted to address some of the issues or questions that the
particular text raises, rather than creating endnotes or explanatory apparatus in the actual translation. The documents are arranged according to prominent topics, but almost all the texts illustrate multiple themes and patterns. We have made references to some of these overlaps in the chapter introductions, while leaving readers to make use of the index to explore further cross-references.

MR, State College, Pennsylvania
LS & KT, Los Angeles, California
Colonial Mesoamerica